

# **JAPAN 2012 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT**

## **Executive Summary**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom and, in practice, the government generally respected religious freedom. The trend in the government's respect for religious freedom did not change significantly during the year.

There were few reports of societal abuse or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

The U.S. government closely monitored the state of religious freedom, conducted outreach to minority religious groups and NGOs, and discussed religious freedom with the government

## **Section I. Religious Demography**

The Statistics Bureau estimates the population to be 127.5 million as of October. Because the government does not require religious groups to report their membership, it is difficult to determine the number of members of different groups. A 2009 report by the Agency for Cultural Affairs (ACA) indicates that membership claims by religious groups totaled 207 million. This number, substantially more than the country's population, reflects many citizens' affiliation with multiple religions. For example, it is common to practice both Buddhist and Shinto rites.

According to the ACA's 2009 statistics, 106 million persons identified themselves as Shinto, 90 million as Buddhist, and 2.1 million as Christian, while nine million followed "other" religions. The category of "other" includes Islam, the Bahai Faith, Hinduism, Judaism, or no religion. The government does not compile statistics on the number of Muslims in the country specifically, but a 2005 report by academic sources estimates the Muslim population at 63,000.

There is no significant correlation between religious affiliation and ethnicity, politics, or socio-economic status; the society is relatively ethnically and religiously homogeneous. The indigenous Ainu people, who practice an animist faith, are concentrated mainly in Japan's northern island, Hokkaido. Some immigrants and foreign workers practice religions other than Shintoism, the indigenous religion, or Buddhism.

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### **Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom**

#### **Legal/Policy Framework**

The constitution and other laws and policies protect religious freedom.

According to the ACA, approximately 183,000 religious groups are certified by the central government as well as by prefectural governments as religious groups with corporate status. The government does not require religious groups to register or apply for certification, but certified religious groups receive tax benefits.

The Religious Juridical Persons Law, as amended in response to the 1995 sarin gas attack on Tokyo's subway system by Aum Shinrikyo, provides the government with some authority to supervise certified religious groups. The law requires certified religious groups to disclose their assets to the government and empowers the government to investigate possible violations of regulations governing for-profit activities. Authorities have the right to suspend a religious group's for-profit activities if the group violates these regulations.

The government does not observe any religious holidays as national holidays.

#### **Government Practices**

There were no reports of abuses of religious freedom in the country.

Following 2011 allegations that the government had collected personal information on Muslims resident in the country, representatives of a Muslim group reported that the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department and the National Police Agency had apparently discontinued the practice.

The government granted temporary humanitarian protective status to Chinese individuals who were Falun Gong (also referred to as Falun Dafa) practitioners. Some of these individuals reported that the Chinese embassy in Tokyo would not renew their Chinese passports due to their faith. The temporary humanitarian status allowed them to remain in the country and to travel overseas using travel documents issued by the Japanese government.

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The government continued to refuse refugee status to any of the more than 50 Rohingyas who feared ethnic and religious persecution in Burma. The majority of these individuals had resided in Japan more than five years, and some for more than 15 years. Some reportedly entered the country illegally and were not associated with any formal resettlement program. The government issued temporary stay visas to Rohingyas without refugee status; the visas required frequent renewal. In addition, the temporary status carried some risk of deportation. Representatives of a group promoting Rohingya rights reported that the authorities had detained one individual on temporary status following the rejection of his asylum request.

### **Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom**

There were few reports of societal abuses or discrimination based on religious affiliation, belief, or practice.

“Deprogrammers” working with family members reportedly continued to abduct Unification Church (UC) members and members of other minority religious groups. The number of reported cases has declined sharply since the 1990s, but the nongovernmental organization (NGO) Human Rights Without Frontiers International maintained that abductions and deprogramming of UC members continued to occur. Japanese courts rejected some claims for prosecution or restitution in civil court based on the perceived lack of valid evidence of these abductions.

The UC reported three cases in which church members were abducted during the year, as well as two cases of suspected abduction. According to the church, one abductee was possibly still confined. The other individuals who were abducted and later released were still with the church at year’s end. The UC also asserted that, despite universities’ efforts to improve the situation, universities throughout the country continued to hold “cult prevention” workshops and campaigns urging students to avoid groups affiliated with the church and contributing to a hostile campus environment for Unificationist students. A university president confirmed the existence of anti-cult workshops, but stressed they were not exclusively targeted against the UC. A student filed suit against Saga University for slander and violating religious freedom for statements allegedly disparaging the UC marriage of the student’s parents. In a case filed in July, a former member alleged that the UC concealed its identity during the recruitment process and that the

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plaintiff lost her well-paying job by joining the UC. The case was pending at year's end.

While society was largely supportive of the right of Falun Gong practitioners to practice freely, the Chinese embassy in Tokyo reportedly carried out a campaign to persuade Japanese organizations to discriminate against Falun Gong practitioners. Some of the country's top facilities refused to host Shen Yun Performing Arts, a New York-based performance group associated with the Falun Gong, but other smaller theaters hosted the group.

Significant interfaith efforts continued during the year. The Japanese Association of Religious Organizations, an interfaith NGO, promoted religious culture and interfaith harmony. It sponsored a conference in March to present ways in which people of faith could address issues in areas of the country devastated in the March 2011 earthquake and tsunami. Members of the Islamic Center continued to speak at churches and participated in interfaith peace prayers with Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Buddhist groups.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. government closely monitored the status of religious freedom, conducted outreach to minority religious groups and NGOs, and discussed religious freedom with the government.

Embassy representatives met with a variety of faith-based groups and religious leaders. The ambassador and deputy chief of mission both hosted events to highlight the work of NGOs promoting human rights and religious freedom in the country and the region. Embassy officers discussed the Jewish community and its interactions in the local society with Rabbi Antonio Di Gesu. Embassy representatives spoke with UC leaders about religious kidnappings and forced conversion. Embassy officers met with representatives of the Rohingya population who reported on human rights issues in the Burmese state of Rakhine, and the Japanese government's reluctance to grant refugee status to Rohingyas fearing religious persecution in Burma. Embassy staff met with a representative of the Islamic Center, who provided an overview of the government's relations with the Muslim community and described interfaith efforts in which his organization was involved. Embassy representatives also met with Falun Gong practitioners.

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The ambassador hosted an Iftar dinner to mark the end of Ramadan, attended by 24 chiefs of mission in Tokyo, as well as a number of other embassy employees, Diet members, business leaders, Muslim and other religious leaders, and members of Japanese government agencies.